



Undergraduate Review

Volume 2

Article 16

2006

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Robert J. Cannata

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Recommended Citation

Cannata, Robert J. (2006). We Don't Need No Water: Joyce and O'Brien Burning the Roof of High Art. *Undergraduate Review*, 2, 98-101.

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol2/iss1/16

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We Don't Need No Water: Joyce and O'Brien Burning the Roof of High Art

BY ROB CANNATA

Rob wrote this piece for Dr. Garland Kimmer's Irish Literature I class and presented it at the 2005 National Conference of Undergraduate Research. Rob recently graduated with a B.A. in English and intends to pursue his writing, though it often seems to outrun him.

Canonical authors — Spenser, Tennyson, Dickens, the like — are representative enough of their eras to have become landmarks of their time. The Modernist James Joyce stands in this league, approaching the likes of Shakespeare and Dickens in his fame. Joyce is mostly known as unapproachably dense in his knowledge in writing: a running joke among Joycean scholars is that only about twenty of them have actually read *Ulysses* all the way through. This perception of Joyce as intellectually challenging has placed him in the category of “high art” — fodder for the educated elite. But in much of his work, Joyce himself ridicules the concept of “high art,” mocking the existing artistic value systems of his time and upsetting the very prestige the intellectual community gives him. The later Irish writer Flann O'Brien, who has been placed in a similar category by the postmodern literati, rebels against this same value system by using similar tactics. By juxtaposing the low and high realms of art, Joyce and O'Brien undermine the structure of cultural value imposed by their British overseers.

Walter Pater's essay, “Aesthetic Poetry,” helps to define the Late Victorian classifications of low and high art (Joyce's artistry flourished in the Modern period, but he grew up in a time frame dominated by Late Victorian thought). Pater states of poetry, “It is a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal. Like some strange second flowering after date, it renews on a more delicate type the poetry of a past age, but must not be confounded with it” (95). For Pater, poetry builds upon past themes in new contexts. With this he suggests that a reader must be properly versed in past literature before poetry can have significant meaning, and so the poet and reader are bound to the high art canon, only able to refine and perpetuate the spirit of the canon.

Matthew Arnold puts other bonds on poetry in his "The Study of Poetry." He states that "the best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can. A clearer, deeper sense of the best in poetry, and the strength and joy to be drawn from it, is the most precious benefit. . ." (1535). Again, key words like "forming" and "sustaining" imply an existing value structure that must be built upon and gradually refined until a "clearer, deeper sense" of poetics is achieved. To Arnold, artists build in aim of a specific goal: understanding. This understanding must be refined and clean, created with an ideal of evaluated aesthetic perfection in mind.

Pater and Arnold preach a structure that Joyce and O'Brien rebel against, while the Irish writers' works are placed into this same canonical structure. As Irishmen, Joyce and O'Brien were subject to the imposition of this Victorian value system through colonization and undermine it by exposing its unrealistic portrayals of truth, culture, and understanding.

Stephen Dedalus is, to Joyce, the typical high art elitist. When we leave Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, he is brimming with idealistic ambition: "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race" (*Portrait* 218). How Stephen, a Jesuit-educated man of letters, can relate to the Irish poor, never mind create their conscience, is not answered. Stephen has created an aesthetic barrier between himself and low Irish culture. Take his opinion of his father, Simon. As a quiet witness to Simon and his drunken cronies, Stephen reflects condescendingly, "His mind seemed older than theirs: it shone coldly on their strifes and happiness and regrets like a moon upon a younger earth. . . He had known neither the pleasure of companionship with others nor the vigour of rude male health nor filial piety" (*Portrait* 93). Stephen's sense of aesthetic cleanliness gives him a feeling of superiority — a modernist, elitist pursuit of ultimate truth — that carries him

idealistically through *Portrait*. Stephen's aesthetic cleanliness isn't echoed by his physical state — we learn early in *Ulysses* that, in a symbolic rejection of his baptism, Stephen hasn't bathed in months (Blamires 6). The juxtaposition of physical filth and mental purity could be Joyce's attempt to chip at Stephen's conception of himself.

Stephen's indignation continues in *Ulysses*. Buck Mulligan, friend and temporary host, playfully criticizes Stephen's self-importance, which infuriates Stephen. After a minor argument, Mulligan ridicules Stephen's dramatic pensiveness and offense, stating "Don't mope over it all day. . . I'm in consequent. Give up the moody brooding" (*Ulysses* 8). Mulligan also pokes fun at Stephen's high-minded theory on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and the self-importance of academics in general: "It's quite simple. He proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father" (*Ulysses* 15). Stephen chimes in his one-word appraisal of Buck at the end of the "Nestor Episode: "Usurper" (*Ulysses* 18). Buck is an affront to his quest for artistic and ultimate understanding ("Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" [*Ulysses* 162]). Of course, when Stephen finally discloses his full theory of Shakespeare in "Scylla and Charybdis," he is asked:

—Do you believe your own theory?

—No, Stephen said promptly. (*Ulysses* 175).

Stephen's inability to believe his own intellectual work further unsettles his pursuit of an ultimate aesthetic or truth.

Through Stephen, Joyce, is ridiculing the claim of objective, pure understanding. Compare Stephen's view to that of T.S. Eliot, the quintessential modernist, on "the idea of classicism," or a tendency "toward an higher and clearer conception of Reason, and a more severe and serene control of the emotions by Reason" (qtd. in Donoghue 21-22). To Joyce, such clarity is a myth, and without such clarity the concept of one discourse or argument being "higher than another is questionable. Joyce seems to feel that high and low culture are not as dissimilar as the pretentious would think.

In *Ulysses as a Comic Novel*, Zack Bowen comes to a similar conclusion of Joyce's juxtapositions of high and low: "The comic universe (of *Ulysses*) is. . . a world where the plights of the characters invite instant, everyday identification and where the crude and the sublime exist side by side (10). Alongside Stephen's sublime argument is his own disbelief; alongside the sublimity of his audience of scholars is the crudity of their self-important pride in dead words and ideas. In this topsy-turvy world the establishment of elitism and canonical knowledge is a highly flawed one.

Bowen relates these juxtapositions to a greater theory of Joycean value. By refuting and mocking both the high and the low in equal parts, Joyce "tells us that the mundane and trivial are all right, that they are the stuff that human experience is really all about, and that insignificance is not shameful" (69). Joyce asserts the importance of the low to be equal to that of the high, and the artistic value system crumbles. Furthermore, Joyce gives us a role model who lives outside the system: Leopold Bloom "does not hanker after an ultimate discourse: he has instead a wry, curious, observant play of mind that is attentive to discourse and is usually unthreatened when the discourse is superior to his own" (Maddox 139). By refusing to feel inferior in the face of a more "authoritative" discourse, Bloom saps its power to make him an inferior subject. Stephen, who still struggles to attain the status of high artists (therein admitting his current identification as an inferior artist) frets over Buck's jabs and conceptualizes himself as a failing, frustrated human being instead of a content, caring human being like Bloom.

A prime example of bumbling Bloom taking on the world of high art comes only ten pages after meeting him. Sitting on his toilet, Mr. Bloom ponders over *Macham's Masterstroke*, a "prize titbit" in his morning paper. Inspired by its wit, he considers doing a similar study on his wife Molly. This leads to reminiscing and thoughts of Molly's adulterer-to-be Blazes Boylan. He soon forgets all about the article before him. In fact, to make Joyce's point, he uses it as a handy piece

of toilet tissue before heading off for this morning errands (*Ulysses* 55-56). The moralizing story may be smart, but it does little to resolve Bloom's dilemmas and finds its final use among the rest of the refuse: read, digested, pondered, and excreted by Bloom. In addition to this commentary on literature, the very concept of having a character use a toilet "on screen" is emblematic of Joyce's attempt to rail against the confines of high art.

Flann O'Brien was heralded, much to his chagrin, as the heir apparent to the Joycean throne. He once proclaimed, "If I hear that word 'Joyce' again, I will surely froth from the gob!" (*At Swim, Two Birds* v). O'Brien's novel *At Swim, Two Birds* is regarded as one of the best postmodern metafiction — that is, a book that knows it's a book and lets you know it's a book to make a point about the artificiality of books, especially books like itself. Or, in the words of Keith Hopper: "The metafictionalist deconstructs the magic of fiction by unveiling the magician's props" (5). This requires odd shifts in plot, narration, and scope to make the reader painfully aware of the writing process, and these shifts create a degree of difficulty and impenetrability reminiscent of Joyce's later works. Like Joyce's work, metafiction also attacks existing value systems. As Hopper explains,

Self-awareness of literary practices is not merely a flashing trick of aleatory sleight-of-hand but an integral part of the wider postmodernist ethos, as it forcibly reminds the reader of the ineluctable writtenness of 'reality,' and, on a macrocosmic scale, at the real world is not 'given' but constructed. (9)

If life is, to an extent, written and constructed, then one has a level of control over one's self-conceptualization as an inferior, a superior, or — like Bloom and Mulligan — an observer: one who sits back and bemusedly watches the rat race. If this status is a matter of choice and not caused by a monolithic value system outside the self, then the validity of that value system comes into serious question.

At Swim, Two Birds juxtaposes high and low thought with merry frequency. Its narrator, a bright, lazy student, ponder intellectually his first sip of porter: "The mind may be impaired, I mused, but withal it may be pleasantly impaired. Personal experience appeared to me to be the only satisfactory means to the resolutions of my doubts. . . .Lightly I subjected myself to inward interrogation" (*At Swim, Two Birds* 28-29). Our precocious young man needs to theorize an excuse for his first drunk. This is more than a little of a parody of Stephen Dedalus. The value system clashes: high theory, low sobriety. To his credit, O'Brien's narrator at least has a dry sense of humor about it all. And while the narrator spins our view of him with Keatsian references to revelry ("Who are my future cronies, where our mad carousals? What neat repast shall feast us light and choice of Attic taste with wine whence we may rise. . . .What mad pursuit? What pipes and timbrels? What mad ecstasy?" [*At Swim, Two Birds* 29]) the reality of the situation is that he ends up "leaving a gallon of half-digested porter on the floor of a public-house in Parnell Street" (*At Swim, Two Birds* 30) and growing a beer belly (*At Swim, Two Birds* 64).

O'Brien takes on artistic value directly in *At Swim, Two Birds*. In one scene Shanahan, Lamont, and Furriskey — three contemporary Irishmen — are sitting and conversing with Finn MacCool, a legendary hero of Old Ireland. Finn, as in much of the rest of the novel, drones on tiresomely about the virtues of Finn's People and begins an epic poem that becomes an Old-Irish grab-bag of images, with choice lines like "good its yewy yew-yews" (*At Swim, Two Birds* 111), "I flee before skylarks, / it is the tense stern-race, / I overleap the clumps / on the high hil-peaks" (*At Swim, Two Birds* 111), and "O birch clean and blessed, / O melodious, O proud, / delightful the tangle / of your head roots" (*At Swim, Two Birds* 100).

Our Dublin everymen are not entertained. Eventually Shanahan interrupts and speaks of another poet, the fictional Jem Casey. Finn drones on, but Shanahan overrides him and

recites one of Casey's poems about, what else: porter. An excerpt:

When food is scarce and your larder bare
And no rashers grease your pan,
When hunger grows as your meals are rare—
A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN.
In time of trouble and lousy strife
You still have got the darlint plan,
You can still turn to a brighter life—
A PINT OF PLAIN IS YOUR ONLY MAN!
(*At Swim, Two Birds* 108-9)

Casey's work is straightforward, simple, and will never win a Pulitzer. Yet it is of more value to the modern Dubliner than Finn's heroic inaccessibility. To the majority of the humans in the room, Casey wins the war of value, turning the system upside-down.

This unsettling of artistic value is a part of a larger cultural unsettling of value in Irish society whereby the Irish began to see themselves less and less as colonized inferiors and more and more as a nation that could challenge British authority. Artists like Joyce and O'Brien, instead of trying to claw their way up the rungs of British culture, simply sidestepped the entire issue by tearing apart the validity of that culture's judgments in the first place. Joyce and O'Brien both show a literary progression from an elitist, late Victorian/Modernist value system of high and low culture to a subversive, unstructured system where the line between the canon and pulp fiction isn't as clear as it used to be.